



Review

Mindfulness-based meditation to decrease stress and anxiety in college students: A narrative synthesis of the research

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 March 2015

Received in revised form 13 December 2015

Accepted 15 December 2015

Available online 23 December 2015

Keywords:

Mindfulness

Mindfulness-based stress reduction

Stress

Anxiety

College students

ABSTRACT

Objective: The primary purpose of this paper was to narratively review the research testing the effects of mindfulness meditation on stress and anxiety in the college students; reviewing the inclusion of mindfulness was a secondary purpose.

Methods: A literature search resulted in 57 studies on the effectiveness of mindfulness meditation in reducing stress and anxiety in college students.

Conclusions: Researchers examined anxiety in 40 studies, self-reported stress in 34, physiological stress in 11, and mindfulness in 24. Thirty-three of 40 and 25 of 34 studies showed significant decreases in anxiety and stress respectively; 22 of 24 showed an increase in mindfulness. Physiological stress had inconsistent results indicating a need for further research. Overall, mindfulness meditation shows promise in reducing stress and anxiety in college students. Additionally, there are a number of differences in mindfulness interventions including frequency, duration, instructional method, and inclusion of yoga, that need quantitative examination (meta-analysis) to determine which is most effective.

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1. Introduction

Transition to college requires emerging adults to adapt to new environments, social situations, academic workload, and much more. As students attempt to acclimate to new environments and situations, stress and anxiety often occur. Mindfulness meditation (MM) is a meditative practice that encourages focus and attention. Recently mindfulness-based interventions have been widely applied in research and integrated into college programs with the expectancy that they provide effective coping strategies for students who are under considerable stress to be successful.

Currently there are no narrative reviews on MM in college students. Therefore, we conducted a narrative review of MM interventions used to reduce college student stress and anxiety.

2. Background

2.1. Stress

Stress is the perception that a situation or event exceeds coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Students can experience stress from living away from their caregivers for the first time, changing social lives, and challenging experiences of higher learning. Stress at low levels can be beneficial, motivating students to perform well and preserve their mental and physical well-being. However, a majority of college students (53.5%) reported that their stress was above average or extreme. High level stress can have negative psychological, social, and academic impacts (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2015a, b; Hughes, 2005; Kang, Choi, & Ryu, 2009). Stress can affect students' timeliness of assignments, absences, and attrition (Ratanasiripong, Sverduk, Hayashino, & Prince, 2010). Stress was reported as the primary reason students performed poorly in a course, exam, or project (30%); 45.1% reported that academics were 'very difficult' to handle (ACHA, 2015a, b).

Stress in college students is not a new topic. Research on stress in college student's dates back more than 50 years, with the first study focusing on graduate student stress (Reifnam, 2011). Since then there have been a myriad of interventions created and intervention studies conducted with students to find a method of decreasing stress or improving the ability to cope with stress. Researchers have examined guided imagery, journaling, exercise, music therapy, and most recently meditation. Yet, stress continues to be a debilitating problem for college students. In 2015, 30% of students reported that stress interfered with their academic performance within the last year (ACHA, 2015a, b). This is a 2.2% increase since 2000. While this is only a small increase; stress is still on the rise in college students. .

2.2. Anxiety

Stress, when not dealt with effectively, can cause anxiety (Hughes, 2005; Kang et al., 2009). Anxiety is an ambiguous feeling that is worsened when a person experiences extended, unresolved stress or multiple stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Like stress, mild anxiety can have a positive influence on academic outcomes. Mild levels of anxiety can increase efficiency and intellectual functioning. However, high levels of anxiety are detrimental to academic outcomes. In fact, while 56.9% of students experienced 'overwhelming anxiety' in the previous twelve months, 21.9% of college students reported that anxiety negatively impacted their academics (ACHA, 2015a, b; Godbey & Courage, 1994). Students with both decreased aptitude for academics and high levels of anxiety are more likely to have poor study skills and academic outcomes, placing them at an increased risk of failure.

Testing is reported as one of the most anxiety provoking events among college students, and poor test scores are often a result of high anxiety (Godbey & Courage, 1994). Excessive levels of anxiety may impede intellectual functioning and those with high anxiety were more likely to report low grades (Godbey & Courage, 1994). Stress and anxiety negatively affect memory, concentration, problem-solving, and academic performance and insalubrious elevations can lead to illness, rumination, avoidance, depression, and any number of other psychosomatic or physical problems. (Beddoe & Murphy, 2004; Kang et al., 2009). In fact, anxiety has been the foremost diagnosed or treated mental health condition in college students (15.8%; ACHA, 2015a, b). Student reports of anxiety have almost doubled in the last 15 years. In 2000, 11.3% of students

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